

Planning panel vote on livestock is setback for biotechnology

Goat Farm

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In a blow to biotechnology in Santa Cruz County, the planning commission decided Wednesday that raising livestock for medical research does not automatically count as agriculture.

In a 5-0 vote before a packed board chambers, the commission found that raising livestock for research products is not specifically allowed in the county's agricultural zones.

The commission stopped short of banning the practice from farmland altogether. Instead, it asked the board of supervisors to decide what level of special permit should be required for biotechnology operations on agricultural land. It recommended that at the very least, neighbors be notified of a permit application.

The vote followed nearly four hours of public comment

and was a disappointment to Santa Cruz BioTechnology, the private company at the heart of the dispute.

Earlier this year, company owners John and Brenda Stephenson bought a 200-acre ranch on the county's north coast, where they have been keeping 400 company goats.

The goats are injected with inert proteins and produce harmless antibodies, which are filtered from their blood at the company's headquarters in Santa Cruz. The antibodies are sold to researchers seeking cures to cancer, Alzheimer's disease, AIDS and other ailments.

"It's an unfortunate decision," Stephenson said after the vote.

Neighbors of the Stephensons' goat ranch complained to county planners that the oper-

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John Stephenson among some of the 400 goats at the ranch.

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ation was more akin to industry than agriculture.

"Just because Mr. Stephenson's facility is using farm animals, I don't think that makes it a farm," said Ray Gwyn Smith of Bonny Doon. "If white rats were there and being injected with antibodies, would it then be a farm?"

Department staff members disagreed and recommended that the activity be allowed to continue without further review. Commissioner Denise Holbert, however, said biotechnology is too different from conventional agriculture

to be allowed without further county oversight, and moved that permits be required.

"I don't think this is farming as we know it," Holbert said. "I think the farming is unconventional. I think we need to have some regulations governing this use."

Holbert's motion still allows Santa Cruz BioTechnology to continue its goat ranching while the permit process is developed, but with a provision that it may not expand by more than 20 percent.

Though they voted with Holbert, commissioners Dale Skillicorn and James Hamlin indicated earlier that they disagreed in principle.

"A goat is a goat is a goat," Skillicorn said. "The effect on the land of raising a goat is the same whether the goat is used to produce hair or milk or medical research products. I haven't heard anyone say we shouldn't raise chickens because an egg may end up in a lab."

Stephenson said in an earlier interview that further government regulation of operations such as his goat ranch would send a chilling message to other biotech firms that might come to Santa Cruz. The commission's decision affects one other company, El-Labs in Soquel, which has been in business 17 years with 40 goats.